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Engendered Spaces:

An Analysis of the Formation and Perpetuation of Female Spheres in Ghana

Emily Starr Bean

Ghana: History and Cultures of the African Diaspora

Spring 2005

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Medaase! Medaase! Medaase!

Abstract:

The following paper seeks to address the complex structures that women have created to facilitate their multiple roles in society. I argue that although there is great community in these female-dominated spheres they have formed to orchestrate their duties, the pattern of gender-division is both a product and a perpetuation of the marginalization of their space in the greater society. I open my paper with an anecdotal analysis of the micro-community of a woman's world that the market provides, detailing the complex social, political, and economic structures within that realm. I continue to commend the complexity of this community but to call attention to the lack of ownership these women have once they leave the market environment. Then I move into an analysis of the ways that these market relations have been transported into the public and private gender spheres of women in more formal realms. Here I analyze the new issues that women face in this work and how many of these issues, such as competition, discrimination, lack of access to education, and social conditioning, have led their opportunities to be compartmentalized and limited. I conclude the paper with a discussion of the significance of these spaces in a culturally appropriate understanding of Western feminism.

Methodology

I started this project unable to think beyond any broad notion of “womanhood” and “empowerment”. I wanted to dispel the myths of a homogenous African Woman and instead replace that detrimental category with examples in which women, in their diverse ways, have begun to achieve what they would classify as empowerment. Only days into my investigation I realized how inconsistent these concepts were with the situation.

Ghana has a culture in which women will be mothers, will work, and will be in charge of domestic duties. Through witnessing these remarkable tasks, I started thinking about women and work in this culture. Coming from a society in which a woman who works full-time outside the home is socially stigmatized from a being a “good mother”. I was impressed by the inverse in Ghana where a woman must work extra-domestically to be a good mother. The other element of Ghanaian society that caught my attention was the strict division of gender spheres and roles. There are places that men and women meet in the middle, but this is a culture in which each respective sex has relatively concrete roles, from which there will be minimal stray. In viewing these spheres. I wondered how women support and reinforce each other to fulfill their roles. In a changing society, in which some women are stepping into more male spheres, how to they fare?

I continued this thinking and wondered what types of things and what societies have they created that become masked behind their “domesticity” or their routine labour. What female communities have been formally and informally created to help them survive? These questions led me to one looming question: do these spaces provide a sense of solidarity and strength? Or do they simply marginalize their work and mask the complexities of women’s lives?

To explore these questions I concentrated my research in four main areas. First I spent a substantial amount of time sitting in traditional female spheres. I worked with market ladies, talking with them informally about their lives and jobs and learning the ways of their trade. I also assisted fish-mongers in the smoking and preparation of the fish they would sell at the market. Additionally, I participated in the production and sale of small-scale income-generating activities, while often caring for children, preparing dinner, and doing other household tasks simultaneously. The second part of my research consisted of interviews. I interviewed women in more “modern” spheres, many of whom do not work in strictly female environments. I inquired about their lives as mothers and employed workers, how they manage those tasks, how they are treated in their sexually-integrated environment, and about the importance of women in their lives. Third, I found formal female support networks and interviewed academics and others who are key figures in efforts to encourage the participation, development and growth of women in the community. Finally, I used literary research. For this time-limited project, however, this form of research was

minimal, because I wanted to focus primarily on the words and lives of the women with whom I interacted.

Due to the nature of this project, being a four-week exploration of a topic in a culture in which I am conspicuously foreign, my abilities were limited. Speaking minimal Fante, the local language, was another inhibiting factor. I preferred not to work through translators, which meant that most of my information came from women with an assumed level of education. Other than time and lingual restrictions, the limitations primarily come from the fact that I as an outsider can only understand as much as the studied will allow me to see. What I am studying is not “real, candid Ghana” but rather what Ghanaians reveal as a reaction to me.¹ My depths of comprehension extend to my own borders and no further. Therefore, this project is released with an understanding that my presentation should not be taken as fact, but as a cultural interpretation of another, perhaps even a cultural interpretation of myself.

¹ Michael Taussig. Lecture class. “Interpretation(s) of Culture,” Fall 2004, Columbia University, New York.

INTRODUCTION

“The issue of women’s rights is inextricably linked with that of survival. Their concerns relate to the provision of the basic necessities of life that will relieve them from the anxieties inherent in their existence, so that they can direct their energies towards making a worthwhile contribution to the achievement of a sustainable improvement in the conditions in which they live, and to the development of their society.”²

Men and women around the world have grouped themselves independently according to their sex. In Ghana, these groupings have historically been a source of pride, with women serving certain functions and men serving others. Although they may have been subject to different tasks, their respective responsibilities joined together to form a complete whole in which each sex dominated in certain realms. In recent years as the social, economic, and political structures of Ghana have changed, the role that these spaces play has evolved as well. Today, both formally and informally, women have grouped themselves together, creating networks and support systems that allow them to tackle their roles as mothers and workers in a society that does not necessarily have the same community as before.

In 1975 the United Nations declared the commencement of the International Decade of the Woman. Ghana chose to participate, increasingly involving women in the political scene and investigating their status in society. Since that year, much attention has been paid to women’s issues within the country. Many efforts have been made to bring women and their needs into the public realm. A large majority of these efforts perpetuate the belief in a separation of gender realms, promoting women in certain spheres that are dominated by other women. Outside of this public realm women have created parallel gender spaces of support. Coming from a society in which gender roles are often less concrete, I began to wonder about these spaces. What cultural purpose and significance do they have? Are they a source of strength? Or have they developed out of necessity? This paper sets forth to explore that issue.

The semester before studying abroad in Ghana. I took a class entitled “Women and Gender in Latin American History” which tackled the issue of culturally appropriate understandings of women in society and the perceptions that she and that society hold of her. We started the semester with a reading by Leila Ahmad entitled “Beyond the Veil” which concerns the practice of placing Muslim women in sexually-segregated spaces and challenges the notion that these spaces are a source of oppression. Ahmad argues that, conversely, this is the area in which these women can come together and discuss issues about their husbands, build friendships

² Florence Abena Dophy. *The Emancipation of Women: An African Perspective*. (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1991) xiv.

and gather support from the female-community. “Beyond the Veil” was the beginning of my interest in the significance of these spheres and a desire to uncover their roles through the eyes of the women who participate in them, rather than casting them off as a way of relegating women to certain areas of society.

While this is the only article I have read specifically addressing gender spheres, many articles have been written in relation to this topic. In “Ga Women and Socioeconomic Change in Accra, Ghana” Claire Robertson presents a strong report of her research among market women in the greater Accra area and the ways in which social and economic changes have affected their lives. As listed in the bibliography, Florence Abena Dolphyne’s books on female emancipation and capacity-building both offer articles concerning the efforts that women have made (almost all of which occur in sexually segregated environments) in recent years to increase their income-generating capacity.

A women's World

Within the first few days of our arrival in Cape Coast, all six SIT students were herded onto a bus with a paper in our hands providing instructions regarding purchases that we, in partners were to make around the city. We reached an unidentifiable street where Auntie Naana, the Academic Director, looked over at us with loving eyes and said, "Here we are. Good luck. Goodbye." Sending us on our way. Within minutes my partner and I found someone to help us reach the market where we could complete the first of our tasks, finding and purchasing palm nuts. A young girl led us through the labyrinth of nooks and allies, navigating her way away from the safe enclave and directly into the center of the bustle of *Kotokuraba*, the enormous market of Cape Coast.

Every direction we turned we were faced with new stands overflowing with *ntroba* (eggplant) *enam kyeww* (fried fish), *bankye* (cassava), *anwew* (onions), and more. Women curiously surrounded us in packs, wanting to touch us and know our names. Shouts of "otse den?" ("How are you?") penetrated us from every direction and angle like the potent, unfamiliar smells of the market. Realizing that our English would prove futile, we found a relatively clam corner of the market and timidly inquired where we could buy palm nuts. The woman did not understand and led us eagerly to her friend who sold peanuts. After a moment of confusion, the new woman finally led us to a place with palm nuts.

I had traveled before and had previously found myself in foreign, unusual situations. But this market placed me in a world in which I knew no exits. "Where am I?" initially pounded through my head. "What is this place? How can it function in such seeming chaos? Why is everyone selling the same thing as the next, and how does that work?" I wanted to leave.

Thinking about these questions, I repeatedly found myself amidst these markets throughout my travels and became more comfortable. I began sitting in these spheres watching the women who sell, talking with them, and learning about the order, politics and society of the system. Through my conversations and observations I learned that the chaos of the market is an illusion. Within this seeming disorder there is in reality, immense order. It is a true women's sphere: a place in which they have come together and claimed ownership over their lives and labour. It is a microcosm of a woman's world, meeting their needs appropriately and efficiently. It provides the venue through which women can own and control their economy, work and mother, educate each other and their offspring, and develop the intricate bonds and support provided by sisterhood.

The most obvious purpose of the market is to serve as an economic center. How then, I wondered, does it function? How do these women all sell the same goods and still make enough profit? Is there competition? How do they save? Coming from a culture with a capitalistic mindset, it was difficult for me to comprehend this economic sphere with disputable prices and camaraderie between the sellers. What I learned is that while an economic center, this is not a haven of capitalism. The women wish to sell enough of their goods to make a profit, but not if that entails losing a face to their interactions.

One day in early April I visited the market of Kissi, one of the districts within the larger fishing village of Komenda, on a quest to find ingredients to help a woman in the neighbouring village of Kwahinkrom make the ice cream that she sells in the market each week. I arrived at Auntie Ama's stall, a middle-aged woman who frequently welcomed me into her work environment. After asking what I needed and informing me that she had none of its, she took me by the hand and left her stall, which was immediately covered by a nearby seller who would ensure that the sale of her goods would not be ignored while she assisted me. We hurried to her sister's store, where she listed the ingredients that were quickly gathered for me and directed a fellow market lady to buy two cups of sugar. Although Auntie Ama received no profit in return for her help, that was not the point of her actions. Upon my departure from the market, she grabbed my arms and stuffed them with thirteen bananas, an avocado, and a sack of groundnut paste. Her generosity, like the way that people in the market may allow a person to bargain for a good down to the price at which they purchased it themselves, demonstrated the humanity in her labour. The goal of her work, while no doubt to make profit that will be relocated into the needs of her family, is based much more around exchange and community than gain. In the words of Naana Opoku-Agyemang, "(The market ladies) want to make money, but not at the expense of human relations."³

Capitalism is far from the structure of the market economy. Rather, the women have developed a more appropriate, personalized system. Two aspects dominate the market: the political and financial structures. Located within this peripheral disorder, an intricate political system that is owned and executed by the women has developed. "WE have our own little system with our own politics and regulations." My grandmother, who has been selling pigs' feet and groundnut paste in Kotokuraba for 31 years, told me. "It generates order and has allowed the market to expand greatly."⁴ Each specific food product is organized by a woman called a "Market Queen" who is democratically elected by the sellers of the good. Mame Ekua Ammomaba. A fish-monger in Komenda informed me that the "Fish Queen" of her market controls its daily events. She distributes the fish to all of the women who agree communally on the price at which

³ Naana Opoku-Agyemang, lecture, "Susu Savings," 5 March 2005, Wa, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

⁴ Grandma Asmah, interview by author, 17 April 2005, translated by Ebenezer Wiredu. Cape Coast, Ghana. notes in possession of author.

they will sell it. She delegates subordinates to ensure that everyone is selling peacefully and productively.⁵ Every few weeks the women hold meetings during work hours while another person watches their stands so that they can come together to discuss the events of the market, mediate problems, and elect a new Queen if necessary.⁶ Like the system of economy, the position of a Market Queen is egalitarian rather than hierarchical. During a day in Kotokuraba I was ushered into a seat next to a woman who was cooking bean stew. She fed me palm nuts and wanted me to sit with her for the day. It was only later in the evening that I discovered that this woman who could pass as any other market lady was in fact a Market Queen. Consistent with this egalitarian structure, she does not receive payment for her job, but stands as a reputable, honest worker with “moral over economic worth”.⁷

In addition to a political structure that enables the system to run according to the women's needs, they have also formed their own savings structure called susu savings, which is responsible for holding over 50% of all the savings in Ghana.⁸ The women selling the same item come together to form a group. Together they decide how much they want to save. At the end of each work-day, the Market Queen goes to each person's stall and collects her daily susu to be given to the woman whose rotation makes her the recipient of the savings that day. If a woman cannot afford the amount that a certain group requires, “it is the job of the group to find a place for the person where she can afford to save.”⁹ This system has existed for a long time, enabling the women to take control over their income and providing an economic security net. These groups also provide a venue through which women “exchange information on business techniques, prices and social contacts.”¹⁰ With an increase in banking and a belief that they are more secure, because they operate without the risk of joining a group that may disintegrate before a woman's rotation, some banks have developed a system in the structure of the informal susu savings. Institutions such as Kakum Rural Bank and the Progressive Women's Bank send employees to the market at the end of each day to collect daily savings from the women. After six months of saving successfully they are eligible to receive a loan.¹¹ But some women have stayed faithful to the market-run groups, in which they are united together in a bond of mutual trust and dependency and are not worried by foreign systems requiring literacy, impersonal relations and a small tariff to the collector.

⁵ Mame Ekua Ammomaba, interview by author, 8 April 2005, translated by Grace Abena Baidoo, Komenda. Ghana notes in possession of author.

⁶ Grandma Asmah

⁷ Naana Opoku-Agyemang.

⁸ Naana Opoku-Agyemang

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Claire Robertson. “Ga Women and Socioeconomic Change in Accra, Ghana” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change*. ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (California: Stanford University Press. 1976), 130.

¹¹ Grandma Asmah.

This personalized political and financial economy provides a platform on which the women of the market have been able to gain ownership over their employment. Another area in which the women of Ghana have demonstrated enormous strength is through their ability to serve as mothers and workers. The market provides the space in which they can complete these dual tasks. Many women carry their motherhood, quite literally, on their backs to work. They sell while small children play among the tables or nap under the shade of a stool. Auntie Ama's home is only minutes away from the market, so she can run home to check on her children to school therefore must bring them to work. But the burden of watching them is not faced alone. Babies are passed along from woman to woman, as evidenced by my immediate reception one day of a two week-old child whose mother was back at work, busily selling her goods just feet away.

The raising of children in the market parallels the raising of children in society generally. It is a communal effort, a product of the extended family system. While sitting down with Auntie Ama, a bright-eyed girl of thirteen showed up. "This is my daughter Naana" Auntie Ama told me. "That is her mother," she followed, pointing to a woman in a neighbouring cloth shop.¹² Within the small market of Kissi, the responsibilities and tradition of motherhood are formed. Each woman ensures that all the children, whether her own or someone else's are fed and well-behaved. If a woman is fortunate enough to send her child to school, then at the end of the day he or she will return to learn the ways of his or her mother, thereby informally facilitating the passing of tradition on to the children.

The family support provided by this environment not only allows a woman to work and mother but also is a central place of informal education. Mame Ekua, who smokes fish behind her house and sells them the next day had just returned from the market one evening and was about to eat dinner. When she finished, she diligently set herself to work, smoking the next batch with the help of her children, the same way that she learned the trade from assisting her own mother.¹³ Likewise, the next day I was back in the Kissi market and found my friend Auntie Ama sitting with a new woman. "This is my mother Efua. She is just in from Accra."¹⁴ Efua, like Mame Ekua's mother, taught her daughter the skills needed to live the life of a market lady when Auntie Ama was a young girl, sitting with her mom until she opened her own stand in Kissi in 1991.

The market provides children with knowledge of their mother's profession, but perhaps more importantly, the children learn the powers of social mores and expectations. Like the way in which the women are not in the market to outsell each other and rise above the other women, and the way in which they watch each other's stalls when necessary, or sell a product that someone has made but cannot sell because she must be somewhere else during the day,¹⁵ the bonds of females and society are established here in the market. The women have come together into a

¹² Auntie Ama, informal conversation with author, 7 April 2005, Kissi, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

¹³ Mama Ekua Ammomaba.

¹⁴ Auntie Ama.

¹⁵ Gifty Hickson, informal conversation with author. 4 April 2005, Kwahindrom, Ghana, notes in possession of author

space in which they are the leaders. The market provides a network of structure and support. Friends can be found in every direction: constant calls and bouts of laughter erupt among the women. The market is its own small world, complete with its own set of rules, guiding economy, politics, family, education, and society. Within this world it is the women who control and have ownership over their lives, passing on tradition to their children, solidifying their roles as mothers, workers, and members of a community much larger than themselves.

Problems Within (or rather, Outside) That World

While the market assuredly represents a center of female dominance, to ignore the steps taken before the produce reaches the market and is sold by the women fails to locate their situation within a broader context and could be guilty of presenting a utopian picture of the situation rather than the reality that once these women step outside their functional, female-dominated sphere they no longer lay claim to the same ownership. Claire Robertson who conducted a survey on Ga women in the Greater Accra region discovered through her interviews and surveys that the socio-economic changes experienced in the last half-century “have had the paradoxical effect of making the Ga women simultaneously more economically independent but less qualified in terms of their training to make a success of their independence.”¹⁶ This hindrance to their economic independence is a result of four main areas. They deal with limitations due to transportation, outdated and poorly effective technology, lack of access to credit, and the infrequency with which they own the means of production. These restrictions are not meant to trivialize the greatness of the female community that the market women have created, but rather to call attention to the ways in which the larger system masks the complexities of the infrastructure they have built and to suggest that the sphere has become gender-dominated as a result of the marginalization of women’s work.

The first issue concerns the limits that transportation places on Ghanaian workers in general and female workers in particular. Based on observation, it is quite rare to see female drivers. I have yet to see a woman operating a taxi or a trotro (a van used for public transportation). Even among private vehicles, if a woman is seen in the car she is almost always a passenger, commonly in the back seat when another man is riding. In rural areas where few people own cars, the bicycle is a more common means of transportation. Yet even the use of bicycles is gendered with an overwhelming majority of the riders being male. Because of these limits on transportation, many women workers are restricted in their geographic mobility. As mentioned before. Auntie Ama lives within minutes of her market stand. All of the women who

¹⁶ Claire Robertson, 117

work in that market live in Kissi so that they can easily go to and from work.¹⁷ In urban markets, many women do not have the luxury of living close to work and must travel greater distances. As a result, they are subject to one of two main means of transportation. Many of them, like my grandma and Mame Ekua the fish-monger, take the trotro or a taxi to work, which can be too expensive for a person with a limited daily income. Others without the access to a vehicle are forced to walk, as demonstrated by the scattering of women with goods on their head, occupying any stretch of road.

The second factor affecting women's abilities in these environments is their limited access to technology or the low-quality of the technology that they have. The issue of improper equipment is economically related and extends across the sexes, but because women overwhelmingly occupy small-scale, low-production activities, they are subject to the limitations posed by inefficient technology. Dr. Kofi Sam, former Cabinet Minister under President Rawlings, is now in charge of the Center for Appropriate Technology, or the Rural Women's Empowerment Scheme, an organisation based out of Cape Coast that provides women with loans and technology to enable them to more fruitfully produce their indigenous goods, like palm oil, gari, beads, and batik. He advocates his belief that it is inappropriate technology that is preventing women from excelling. Most women are forced to stay at home and watch the children, often spending six hours a day fetching water or preparing food for the family, leaving them with insufficient time for other activities. "Women are disenfranchised," he said. "They don't go to school. But they produce the food. They dry the fish in ovens. They market it."¹⁸ Without access to better technology, their production capacities will remain small-scale and antiquated. Mame Ekua, who labours each evening after a day at the market, smoking her fish in the new, improved (!) multi-layered oven and yet is still only able to bring in enough income for basic survival needs, exemplifies the plight of many women. The people controlling the larger, industrialized machinery are men who are in charge of cash crops and not people participating in small-scale trade. "Men are the colonizers now. They are in charge of government. They are the lawyers. They need to be attentive to the needs of the country. Supply the women with appropriate technology because they are the producers, the sellers of Ghana."¹⁹

While technology is necessary for improving the situation of women in Ghana, a community like that of the market is formed in many female income-generating activities, as they sit together in areas juicing palm nuts in their machines or processing gari. Nonetheless, the lack of access to the means of production stifles their position, shoving them further and further away from the center and into the margins of the national economy. Sidney Mintz's article "Men, Women and Trade" in Comparative Studies in Society and History shows that although economic

¹⁷ Auntie Ama, informal conversation with author, 5 April 2005, Kissi, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

¹⁸ Kofi Sam, interview by author, 18 April 2005, Cape Coast, Ghana notes in possession of author.

¹⁹ Kofi Sam

growth from Westernisation has increased opportunities for some women traders, on a whole they are limited because most have not entered the new system. Economic changes outside their small market economy have grown, leaving them behind and isolated, which has devalued their traditional roles of production.²⁰

In conjunction with limited technology, which limits income, many women do not have access to credit, especially when their income is subject to seasonal, unreliable labour. Mame Ekua cannot use the banks, she told me, because her work is undependable. The week that I visited her she literally could not go to the market to sell her fish, because she said, “the sea is wild and rough,” and had been for a few days, thereby disenabling the men to bring enough fish home for her to smoke and sell.²¹ Although bankers legally provide money to everyone, the background of men as generally more educated, literate, and property-owning makes banking services more accessible to them.²²

Limited access to transportation, technology, and credit reinforces the lack of mobility in these women’s lives. While the market is a female paradigm of internal ownership, there is not external ownership. Because of the growing formal sector, these women in marketplace environments are forced to labour more hours with the result of their impoverishment and marginalized position.²³ The complexity of these spheres has become masked under this marginalized position. In order to allow women to continue with their cultural roles as workers and mothers, and in order to bring them into the public economy, attention must be paid to the exploitation to which they are subject. Within the market, they claim ownership because they have been able to merge their private affairs with their public work realm. Unfortunately, the market is a private sphere in relation to macro, corporate functions. Because of its nature as women’s work, it maintains its domestic factor and does not receive the due public recognition of its incredible functionality and appropriateness to the needs of women who are expected to fill certain roles in the family and society at large, while simultaneously generating income.

²⁰ Barbara C. Lewis. “The Markets Women of Abidjan” in *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Changes* ed. Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay. (California: Stanford University Press, 1976), 249.

²¹ Mame Ekua Ammomaba.

²² Elizabeth Tattey. *Motherhood: An Experience in the Ghanaian Context*. (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 2002).

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²³ Barbara Rogers. *The Domestication of Women: Discrimination in Developing Societies* (New York: Travistock Publication, 1983), 144.

In recent years, as Ghana has become increasingly “industrialized” and “urbanized”, many women have stepped outside of these traditional female-dominated spheres and have found themselves in a sexually-integrated world. In this supposedly integrated environment, I have been repeatedly struck by the presence of the gendered divisions of labour and society. Ghanaian women are in a system that is not sensitive to the complexities of their lives, but nonetheless they must fill their roles as economic generators and mothers. These changes have disrupted the support previously provided by the structure of the traditional family and clan. In pre-colonial times, societies consisted of more cohesive family units, in which men and women had different roles, but those roles were somewhat more complimentary. Things were not egalitarian between men and women, “but they were not doing the same things, and some of the things that men were doing were recognized as prestigious and some of the things that the women were doing were also recognized as prestigious.”²⁴

Colonialists entered the continent and disrupted the social, economic, and political systems in many ways. They wanted the natives to grow their own decided export crops, which the natives did not want to do. The colonial governments, therefore, placed heavy taxes on the people, which could only be afforded through participation in the production of these crops desired by the imposing governments.²⁵ This in turn led to a shifted composition of society, in which the men engaged in export crops while the women took over food production and smaller-scale enterprises. While the men slowly gained greater access to the means of production, their educational and political opportunities expanded as well, bringing them into the Westernised socio-political structure and leaving the women in more domestic roles. Colonialism has furthered “the concept of devaluing and downgrading women’s labour (which has been) transplanted and incorporated successfully into the national psyche.”²⁶ So even today as women move into these “modern” spheres, they often enter with this stigma of degraded work, which is responsible both for the need to create gender spaces and the marginalized status of those very spaces.

Female Spaces

In a world in which employment atmospheres do not provide the convergence of public and private needs, women are able to complete their tasks through the informal and formal

²⁴ Akosua Anyidoho, interview by author, 20 April 2005, Accra, Ghana. tape recording in possession of author.

²⁵ Jeanne K. Henn. “Women in the Rural Economy: Past, Present, and Future” in *African Women: South of the Sahara*. Ed. Margaret Jean Hay and Sharon Stichter. (New York: Longman Group Limited, 1991), 13.

²⁶ Ifeyinwa Iweiebar. “Women in the Family: Labour and Management. What can be done?” in *Women and the Family in Nigeria*. Ed. A. Iman R. Pittin and A. Omale (Nigeria: CODESRIA Book Series, 1989), 151.

networks that they have created to balance their lives. While women move away from these strictly-female environments and into spheres that are sexually integrated and less attentive to their needs, they are creating networks similar to what exists in the market to be able to conquer their seemingly unconquerable roles as mothers, income generators, and community supporters. Like the market women, they have orchestrated their lives into female spheres that enable them to execute these tasks, form an economic support system, and build a community with other women. But again, like the market ladies, these women in more “educated”, urban environments are not being absorbed into the culture free of prejudice and difficulties. Contrarily, a new set of difficulties has presented itself and continued to mask the complexities of their duties and marginalize their work.

Formal Efforts

While urban environments are not as attentive to the needs of working mothers as they should be, there are some formal institutions that have been created to ease women’s experiences completing their dual jobs and to encourage them to excel in their work spheres. These institutions exist on the political level, in form of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and through local promotion of women. The nature of these programs has been to systematically continue the pattern of sexually-segregated labour, maintaining gender spaces and perpetuating the separation of roles between men and women.

The beginning of governmental attention to the position of women in society occurred in 1975, when the Head of State involved Ghana in the United Nation’s International Year of the Woman. The National Council on Women and Development, which is now called the Department of Women’s Affairs-NCWD and combines women’s and children’s issues²¹ was created ‘to advise the Government generally to all matters relating to full integration of women in national development at all levels.’²⁸ It acts as the official organisation through which international and national institutions address women’s issues. It has promoted research into women’s participation in policy-making, female employment rights, education, women in economy and women in industry, as well as issues pertaining to widowhood, marriage, health, and traditional harmful practices. The headquarters is located in Accra with regional offices scattered across the country. The NCWD holds workshops promoting economic development and

²¹ Monicah Fogah, interview by author, 19 April 2005, Adisadel Secondary School, Cape Coast, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

²⁸ Brief Information on the National Council on Women and Development, 1.

efficiency and it has assisted in the implementation of many traditional income-generating projects involving product-making and food-processing.²⁹

Federacion Internacional de Abogadas (FIDA) is an organisation that exists to assist women gain legal help, especially when they are trying to undergo divorce procedures from their husbands. But the usefulness of this program is not applicable to all women. “Men put fear in women that if they go, they will kill them, so few women go,”³⁰ I was told. Also, the offices are only in major cities, which are often too far for many women to reach, not to mention that my visit at 9 am to the office in Accra was too early for the visiting hours, which occur between 10 and 1, a period of time not accessible to many working women. If the husband leaves, women and children are left to support themselves. This leaves the services available only to certain people. “Another issue is that if you go and (your husband) is arrested, what do you do when he gets out of jail? Are you going to move out of the house? Or stay there with him?”³¹ Issues such as this, apparently, are responsible for the fact that most women do not seek assistance from these institutions. According to records from 1991, only 6% and 1.3% of women took advantage of assistance from the court and the Social Welfare Department, respectively, when their husbands left, engaged in polygamy, or died,³² demonstrating the foreignness and unavailability of these institutions to many of Ghana’s women.

At a more local level, some women have risen to political office and promote women’s issues in their communities. Theresa Kwakye is a District Assembly member in Komenda. She is an established woman who has been able to achieve her high status through support from her community. Both in and out of the Assembly, she told me, she has advocated the rights of women and youth and those who are fiscally challenged. With the help of an NGO, she has assisted the work of fish-mongers. The assistance primarily helps with micro-financing and providing loans. She has also promoted a tie-dye business, in which a free workshop was provided to teach the trade. Unfortunately, many women do not have enough money to implement their knowledge, so they remain at home unable to apply their skill.³³

Like the NGO that helps women in Komenda, this phenomenon of promoting community activities, especially for women, has become a common trend in recent years. Cape Coast is women generate business producing indigenous products like batik, soaps, and beads to be sold abroad. The Executive Director, Renae Adam, a former Peace-Corps volunteer, made applications to find women who are responsible and serious about their commitment. After selecting her employees, she began working with them to establish their trade and encourage the

²⁹ Ibid, 5.

³⁰ Grace Abena Baiden, interview by author, 6 April 2005, Komenda, Ghana, notes in possession of author

³¹ Akosua Anyidoho.

³² Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf. “Household Headship and Women’s earning in Ghana” in *Family and Development in Ghana*. ed. Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf (Accra: Ghana University Press, 1994), 41.

³³ Theresa Kwakye, interview by author, 8 April 2005, Komenda, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

growth of business. “With women, I know that the income will be going back into their families and the community, rather than to some pub.”³⁴ she said. Each month she holds meetings for all the workers to come together and meet and listen to a speaker. Last month’s lecture concerned the Internal Revenue Service, tax-paying and other financial issues. “Women in Progress” is one of many NGOs based in Ghana promoting indigenous skills to be applied to the economic market. The idea of these institutions is to promote capacity-building among women with the knowledge that they already have. Therefore, throughout the last few decades, many of these organizations have developed from the understanding that “these experiences also demonstrate that equal participation in development is fundamental to equitable and sustainable growth.”³⁵ The Presbyterian Women’s Center in a suburb of Accra is one such NGO that emphasizes training that provides women with knowledge, skill and confidence. This program is attentive to the needs of many women and the restrictions posed by lack of time, domestic and monetary constraints, and illiteracy. The center tries to unite women together in an effort to “energize, mobilize, and motivate them, offer female leadership training... and offer employable skills.”³⁶ Florence Abena Dolphyne, former Chairperson on the Board of the NCWD and a professor at the University of Ghana-Legon, believes that the greatest gain from these income-generating activities is “the exchange of ideas among women of different regions and new information collected on techniques or ways to make different things with the same material,”³⁷ furthering the notion of the power of a female community in collective action to raise the general status of women.

Informal Arrangements

While formal institutions and figures like those described above are commendable efforts to bring women into the working economy and onto the political agenda, for many women, this is not enough. While assisting them to gain a face in national interests, women have brought informal, private communities of support either into the workplace or into their home spheres. These systems permit them, like the market ladies, to orchestrate their roles of employment outside and inside the home, allowing them to facilitate their economic participation, educate each other, and construct the bonds of solidarity among women in their society.

Once women step into the formal work sector, their roles as mothers and workers are tested. Upon arrival in Ghana I was amazed by the dichotomy of the issue of women in work between Ghana and the United States. In the United States, a woman who works, leaving her

³⁴ Renae Adam, informal conversation with author, 12 April 2005, Cape Coast, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

³⁵ Esther Ofei-Aboagye. “The Case of Promoting Capacity-Building for Women as an Empowerment Strategy” in *Family and Development in Ghana*. ed. Elizabeth Ardayfio-Schandorf Accra: Ghana University Press. 1994), 2.

³⁶ Rose Akua Ampofo. “The Role of Religious Organisations in Developing Women’s Capacity: A Case of the Presbyterian Women’s Center” in *Experience in Capacity-Building for Ghanaian Women*. ed. Florence Abena Dolphyne and Esther Ofei-Aboagye. (Accra: Asempa Publishers, 2001), 96-98.

³⁷ Florence Abena Dolphyne, 59

children at home often faces social reprimand. In Ghana, conversely, to be a good mother, a woman is expected to work. According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, “in many African countries it was found that in order for a married woman to gain respect from her community, she should be involved in some gainful form of generating income.”³⁸ Unfortunately, work outside the home does little to recognise the needs of mothers. Therefore, women have created support networks for each other that enable them to fill these tasks. If there is one thing that women consistently told me it is that although they have managed being mothers and workers, “It has not been easy!”

The main way in which women fill their roles is through the assistance of other women in their community. Grace Abena Baiden is a thirty-two year old woman living in Komenda. She is a financially-independent, single mother of two girls who teaches Primary School and plans to attend the University of Cape Coast to earn her degree in education this coming fall. She says that she is only able to complete her tasks of working and mothering through the help of her family and her community. Because there are many people in her village of Komenda without employment. Grace allows them to come into her home and work for her in exchange for food and / or housing.³⁹ Not only is she able to carry on with her own economic advancement and education through the help of these women, but she also provides economic stability for those who are otherwise unable to support themselves.

The type of employment in which a person is engaged also facilitates the completion of women’s dual-roles. Alberta Croffie Quayson, a teacher at Wesley Girls’ Secondary School and the mother of three girls, shares the sentiment that the job is a difficult one. She attributes her relative ease to the fact that she has worked in education. “Women in education have a much better time than women in a banking set-up for instance.”⁴⁰ Her house is located on campus, which allows her to move to and from work and the home quite easily. “Also, there is flexibility in my work. I can work until 2:00 and then return home to see that the girls are not up to any naughty things. I can come home and do my house chores, prepare meals for my family, wash, do anything.”⁴¹ In addition to this ease provided by the location of her work, she notes that living on campus allows other women to step in for her when she is unable to attend class or assist her children in some way. Many Lanquaye-Tetteh, a teacher at an all boys’ Senior Secondary School, a mother of four girls, and the wife of a pastor who works in Accra during the week, did not have the same luxury as Alberta initially. After having her four daughters, she had to stop work for some time until they were old enough for school. Then, she received help from girls in her

³⁸ M. Rafique Raza. “Men and Women at Work Theoretical Perspectives on Division of Labour in Developing Societies” in *Women and the Family in Nigeria*. ed. A. Iman. R. Pittin, A. Omole (Nigeria: CODESRIA Book Series, 1989). 139.

³⁹ Grace Abena Baiden

⁴⁰ Alberta Croffie Quayson. Interview by author, 14 April 2005, Wesley Girls Senior Secondary School, Cape Coast Ghana, tape recording in possession of author.

⁴¹ Alberta Croffie Quayson

neighbourhood and eventually from her old daughters.^{42'} While many women have stepped into the formal sphere, it is their informal support that has allowed them to work and mother, because public employment does not provide many accommodations for these dual roles.

In the workplace, many women are minorities and are subject to male domination. Therefore here, again, they have created support systems to strengthen each other and overpower their subjection to control brought about as a result of their minority status. Mary teaches six classes. Sometimes when she has prior engagements, another woman will take over one of her classes. This favor, however, is not reciprocates with men. "Once in a while, when there's a dying need I may have pity, but not too often."⁴³ Alberta has this same type of informal community with the women in her work environment. Though she teaches Social Studies and Religion, departments with only two other women, they frequently sit down together and plan their work or their domestic responsibilities. "It is wonderful! It is wonderful, because we're always popping in and out of each other's homes to see what new innovations each person has done. 'I found a way of cooking this. I found a way of tidying this! I found a way of storing water, cleaning the fridge.'⁴⁴ These women carry their public and private lives inseparably from each other. Because of this common situation, they informally merge their public work domain with their private roles to enable them to bridge the gap and fill their expected duties.

Sometimes women provide each other directly with economic assistance that allows them to survive. As mentioned before, many women who partake in seasonal labour do not receive steady incomes and therefore are not eligible for bank loans. With Grace's steady income, she is able to collect loans from her bank and distribute them to her fish-mongering sisters. They often cannot afford to start the new season without this additional assistance. "I help them to be empowered."⁴⁵ Grace says, by circulating her own money within the female community. Because access to loans is not possible for the labour in which many women partake, they must rely on the assistance of other women who recognise their plight.

Women also have placed a large emphasis on teaching and learning from each other, as shown before in Alberta's experiences, to more easily facilitate and balance all of their tasks. Gina Segbor, a mother of two girls who works with her husband in the Great Commission Movement, an organisation affiliated with the Camupus Crusade for Christ, stresses the importance that women have of teaching each other outside their formal settings. They teach each other how to raise their families, have proper manners, and engage in activities that help their lives run smoothly.⁴⁶

^{42'} Mary Lanquaye Tetteh, interview by author, 13 April 2005, Cape Coast, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

⁴³ Mary Lanquaye Tetteh

⁴⁴ Alberta Croffie Quayson.

⁴⁵ Grace Abena Baiden.

⁴⁶ Gina Segbor, interview by author, 13 April 2005, Cape Coast, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

These economic, familial, and educational networks all come together to form an immense solidarity between the women. They must encourage, support, and reinforce each other. Grace, for example, sees the liberation of women from dependence on men through education and financial opportunities. Because of her status as a well-respected teacher in the community, she says, “I encourage women to send their daughters to school. I try to make a foundation so that they can be successful.”⁴⁷ It is through female networks like these that women can influence and promote each other in a system that does not provide that same assistance.

⁴⁷ Grace Abena Baiden

As women have stepped out of their informal female spheres and into the public realm they have maintained many elements of the market community by bridging the public-private dichotomy in their formal lives through these gendered spaces. First I will demonstrate the significance of these spheres in building a community for women. I will suggest that their private interactions should be brought to the force as proof of women's great organisational skills that have allowed them to perform their multiple tasks and maintain their role as keepers of their families and the community at large. Then I will argue how these spaces can be simultaneously empowering and disempowering in that they allow women to come together and tackle their lives in unison, but also leave their duties in a female-sphere which has led to their work being trivialized, compartmentalized and marginalized.

On an informal level, the female infrastructure brings women together in a bond of unity in which they unite from a common understanding of their duties in society. When discussing advantages of an all-female educational environment, Alberta said that "women are the ones who uphold the community more than the men. In a coeducational environmental, there is minor conflict. A female institution gives you the confidence. Sister power."⁴⁸ These spheres allow the space in which women can support and help each, advises Mary. "You realize you're all in the same soup. You all have the same problems and you can learn a lot....some women still think they can't succeed, so people at the top must go back to the female community to teach others."⁴⁹ And this is just what they have done. Like the little girls in the market who assist their mothers when bottling palm oil or slicing pineapples, the young women in society watch the tradition of female groups helping each other fills their roles and building the bonds of sisterhood.

Formally, these gender spaces are being effectual as well. Theresa Kwakye stresses the immense burden placed on women because they have much greater financial and domestic duties. "The key to success," she believes, "is for a woman to build financially and gain access to bank loans." She believes that due to advocacy groups, "doors have been opened to women, now they know their rights. They are not intimidated. Before a man could slap woman, but not they can't."⁵⁰ Similarly, the growth and recognition of women in the public sphere is calling attention to their situation and acknowledging that women are not just private figures. Female environments like those promoted by NGOs, income-generating activities, and within employment, give women the chance to come together and form reinforcing work sphere. When

⁴⁸ Alberta Croffie Quayson

⁴⁹ Mary Lanquaye Tetteh.

⁵⁰ Theresa Kwakye

asked how she sees society changing, Grace said that the difference is that now women can work. “Men are not reliable. A woman must support herself. Every man wants a woman who will support him.” She believes that people must send their daughters to school, engage them in a trade, so that they can support their husbands when they’re married.⁵¹ Gina agrees that things are changing. “It’s the time for men to take up the full responsibilities they’ve ignored for so long.”⁵² It is this power gained in these realms that has given women the courage to critically analyse their situation.

The second area which these spheres demonstrate is the ability that women have to organize and facilitate. Alberta states the issue perfectly:

“The notion that women are always stuck in the kitchen is no longer working. There’s a funny aspect to it. They say women are stuck in the kitchen. What goes on in the kitchen? Organisation. Planning. Analysis. Implementing. And making sure it gets to the what? The consumer. That’s what goes on inside the kitchen. So who says we can’t bring what goes on in the kitchen outside? Men have realized that they don’t know how to manage it. They don’t know how. They’ve failed. And they realize we have the ideas. We have the manpower. We have the resources. We have been doing it all along, but they have never acknowledge it (before).⁵³

Because of the informal organisation of these spheres, the due recognition that these women deserve has been eclipsed. But, as Alberta said, women are bringing what goes on inside the kitchen outside. It is not uncommon for women to lead lives like Theresa Kwakye, who has managed to raise her children, run her own store, and be a District Assembly person. Other than a small stipend for food and transportation there are no economic benefits to her political involvement. She has been widowed for twenty-two years and life is hard. She keeps the home, pays the school fees, and feeds her children. She has four sons, all of whom she has sent to further education. “I get satisfaction,” she proudly announced, “when I help others. There’s much joy; more than even what I do to get money.”⁵⁴ With this ability to manage and produce for the community, women have proven that on an organisational level they are fully capable of competing and functioning in the world. They carry an enormous load as mothers, workers, and preservers of tradition, but they have successfully carried it.

Perhaps the most significant role that these spaces allow is the perpetuation of the tradition of motherhood and the space women occupy as a result of that position in society. Ghanaian

⁵¹ Grace Abena Baiden

⁵² Gina Segbor

⁵³ Alberta Croffie Quayson

⁵⁴ Theresa Kwakye.

women especially pride themselves on the joys of motherhood, and these gender spaces manifest themselves as inseparable from their role as mothers and caretakers of the home and therefore the community. Many women learn this position from their own mothers and pass it on to their daughters. Theresa Kwakye, credits her mother for the heights that she has attained. Her mother, a textile trader, ensure that all of her children, boy or girl, would be educated. Though her mother was illiterate herself, she taught her children to excel and to reach the highest level of education that they could.⁵⁵ While formal education is highly important, many women, like these, recognise the value of hard work without formal education. Grace believes that education is not the only route through which a woman can gain her independence. If a woman is uneducated but financially stable, then she receives many of the same privileges as that of a formally educated person, she thinks, relating the story of her mother. Her mother, though formally uneducated, started her own business when she was a young woman, buying and selling fishing nets, getting loans where they were accessible, and going to Liberia to sell her goods. She was able to earn enough money to support her family and gain her independence through that medium.⁵⁶

Similarly, women are passing this strength onto their daughters. Mary listed three things as the top priorities to teach her daughters. First, she said, to relate well to people. Second, “Being girls, how to keep house and things about marriage,” and third, to help them receive a good education. “Stand on their two feet, run shoulder-to-shoulder with men. Don’t depend on what a man can do because (women) can do it too.”⁵⁷ Alberta shared this same sentiment of getting her daughters to stand on their two feet. She wants them “to have their own thoughts, to have their own views...they should just get out and let the world see them. Let their impact be felt. Let society know that yes, this is the proper girl’s wat.”⁵⁸ And so these women are transporting their strengths into the next generation.

New Issues They Face

While the efforts on the part of women in both the formal and informal sphere reveal their progress and the complexities of women’s lives, they nonetheless remain far from an equal status to that of men. These spaces, while empowering in many ways, do not come without their problems. By moving into new realms, women are subject to competition and discrimination. Many women perhaps do not wish to deal with these detrimental outcomes, so they remain in female realms. So their “progress” into public, formal positions is partially an illusion.

Many women have found that entering a “male” sphere subjects them to competition from men at work and men at home, further isolating them and frequently sending them back into their

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Grace Abena Baiden.

⁵⁷ Mary Languaye Tetteh.

⁵⁸ Alberta Croffie Quayson.

female environments. Grace notes that women have to work because of the economic problems in the country. But, she says, “(men) do not want them to work all day. If you stay at work late, then the husbands will go with the servant. They prefer their wives to work until 12 or so”⁵⁹ Many women are allowed to work but only up to the point at which they begin to threaten the man’s masculinity. Women’s options are therefore limited. A woman can work to generate income, but she can only fill certain jobs and positions. Additionally, her employment does not change the responsibilities that she has to the home. “Women will return from work and begin cooking, cleaning, caring for children, and men will just sit there and watch TV.”⁶⁰ If a woman is to challenge this dynamic, she faces possible opposition from her husband. Even within work the women are not always equal. Alberta comments on the level of competition that the men pose at her all-girls preparatory school. “The men always feel even her in Wesley Girls, that they should dictate what should be done. But women say, “No. This started with women and if you have a problem you can find your way through the gates.”⁶¹ Because of this competition, it may seem easier for some women not to enter these realms, but to remain in their places of comfort.

In addition to competition, a woman also risks discrimination both at work due to her sex and in society if she occupies a non-traditional space. Mary bemoans the difficulties involved in working in her predominately male environment. It has been difficult, she says. “(men) want to overpower you, even if you are smarter than them. They want to shut you down. It’s a challenge to them that women work at the school.”⁶² Mary’s response is not unusual. She exemplifies the experience of a woman approaching the territory that men have occupied for some time.

There used to be more partnership between husband and wife, but in recent years that partnership has dwindled. The main partnership that exists now is when the husband is self-employed, argues Claire Robertson.⁶³ Gina, for example, works with her husband and has had an amicable home-work relationship with him. When the children were younger, her husband would let them stay by his side while he worked so that she could go to campus.⁶⁴ This is not the typical arrangement that people have, but it an example of the way in which public-private domains can converge to allow a better social order.

If a woman is financially independent and not married, she will not find herself a husband. Grace believes. If she can care for herself, the men are not going to be interested. “Men these days don’t want enlightened people to marry. They want uneducated people so that they can treat them badly.”⁶⁵ While society may be opening doors for women, the fundamental problem of a woman’s relation to men in the male sphere is not evolving at the same rate. In a conversation

⁵⁹ Grace Abena Baiden.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Alberta Croffie Quayson

⁶² Mary Lanquaye Tetteh.

⁶³ Claire Robertson

⁶⁴ Gina Segbor

⁶⁵ Grace Abena Baiden

with a boy at Cape Coast Polytechnic, he told me how he washed his own clothing and cooked his own meals while at school.

“But when I go home my sisters do it for me”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because they are girls,” was his simple reply.⁶⁶

If men are fully capable of doing these tasks, as they are, demonstrated by the fact that they do them when women are not around, then they are also fully capable of adapting their lifestyles to incorporate women’s needs.

The competition and discrimination to which women are subject should be addressed, but the changes do not need to result in a full integration of the sexes and eradication of gender differences. Instead, a more appropriate, sensitive work environment needs to be promoted and a reevaluated or women and their roles must be made that “aim(s) at not changing women or men, (but) rather, it will seek to change perceptions about women and men,”⁶⁷ allowing women to participate at an equal level without having to abandon their traditional role as mothers, like that of Gina and Alberta. Women should be regarded as serious wage-workers, and their needs must be met.

Marginalized Positions

As a result of discrimination, competition, and cultural perceptions of a woman’s appropriate place in society, although these female networks provide a space in which women can develop their economic, familial, and social roles, these very gender spaces, while at once empowering and solidifying, are both a result of and responsible for masking and marginalizing women’s situation. Though a private source of strength, the continued side-lining of women’s interests into gender spaces allows much of their struggle to go unnoticed.

The initial place in which this marginalizing process occurs is in the home. A lecture I attended at the University of Ghana-Legon argued that the representation of the girl in children’s literature is parallel to the way that the girl and women are conditioned in society.⁶⁸ The lecturer argued that ‘good girls’ in literature are those who are quiet, obey their domestic duties, and are free of life’s expectations. She contrasted this with the commonly depicted boy character who is boisterous and mischievous to everyone’s pleasure. She quoted a story about a small girl in which the author stated that “She would work all day without appearing tired. And this made everyone love her.”⁶⁹ This mentality is reinforced to girls within and outside the home from a young age.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, Cape Coast, Ghana 17 March 2003

⁶⁷ Agnes Apusigah, personal e-mail communication, 27 April 2005, e-mail in possession of author.

⁶⁸ Mabel Komasi, lecture, “The Female Gender in Ghanaian Children’s Literature” in the lecture series “Gender and the Humanities.” 20 April 2005, The University of Ghana-Legon; Accra, Ghana. notes in possession of author.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

When girls grow up with these influences in their environment, they lose possession over themselves and become easily subject to the perception and reactions that others will hold of them.

When I asked many women what the most important thing is that they wish to teach their daughters, domestic duties and education were at the top of the list. Gina's response was: "How to go about themselves and how to dress can be found in the word of God. The only thing it cannot teach is how to cook."⁷⁰ Another mother adamantly spoke about the importance of education in freeing women from men's control. That same week she also told her daughters that they better learn to sweep if they are going to find a good husband.⁷¹ Some women openly admitted the difficulties that married life can bring. Mary Asmah is an independent woman whose husband has been working in London, England for two years. "You see Emily," she told me one day, "Without a husband here I am so much more free. I can wake up at six instead of at dawn to prepare breakfast and dinner for my husband upon return from work. While it may be hard to raise the children and work, many single women have a much easier time."⁷² Ghanaian women do not need to renounce their domestic duties, burn their brooms, and liberate their daughters, but to place a woman's responsibilities in contrast to her position relative to a man will undoubtedly hinder the potential that she views possible within herself.

While there is limited challenge to the role of women in society, many women do believe that their position is inferior and must be improved. They see this improvement as coming through education and therefore better employment opportunities. Numerous of the women I interviewed listed education as the number one priority for women in society, and more specifically, for their daughters. Grace hopes that her two girls will pursue their academics. "(Men) always want a woman who is not empowered. But all women want their daughters to be empowered and have opportunities. Women must provide their daughters with an education so that later if they meet a bad man, they can support themselves on their own."⁷³ Theresa Kwakye shares this view. She believes that girls should receive just as much education as boys, because "when you have educated a woman, you have educated a nation."⁷⁴ She thinks that women can organize and rally support for whatever initiatives they take far better than men can, and for that reason they should have precedence in education.

With increased focus on education of young girls, progress has occurred, but frequently it occurs in a marginalized manner, gearing women into specific spheres. Only 10% of women work in the formal sector, with a vast majority filling 'domestic roles' like nursing and basic

⁷⁰ Gina Segbor

⁷¹ Anonymous

⁷² Mary Asmah, informal conversation with author, 15 April 2005, Cape Coast, Ghana notes in possession of author.

⁷³ Grace Abena Baiden

⁷⁴ Theresa Kwakye

education. Others with more prestigious jobs occupy positions of secretarial and clerical work.⁷⁵ Not all women find themselves in these positions. Some women have reached the highest ranks in education, business, and politics, but they are not the majority and therefore the woman's voice is not heard on any sufficient level in positions of decision-making.⁷⁶ While I failed to locate statistics regarding the exact percentages of women attending catering school or learning dressmaking, based on my interactions with many young women I have been overwhelmed by the vast numbers who seem to be engaged in such activities. Each day a class is conducted outside the window of my bedroom. One afternoon I peered through the outlet and saw two classes starkly divided. On the right there was a group of young men, busily learning their mathematical equations to be used toward physics and engineering. Then, as if it were staged, on the left was a gathering of young women, circled around a manikin, complete with measuring tape and scissors, learning how to sew. Similarly, numerous times that I have met young women who are either attending the university or plan to attend, I ask them what they would like to study. Proudly and triumphantly, as though programmed since childhood, each young woman announces to me: "Home Economics!"

There is nothing inherently wrong with a woman choosing to sew and learn domestic skills. The problem comes when that "choice" is not really a choice on the individual's part, but a societal gearing into a position without any chance of critically deciding oneself. According to Claire Robertson, many young women find themselves in these jobs because of a lack of education, hiring discrimination, and the overall economic situation.⁷⁷ Even when young women have the opportunity to apply for jobs outside the more commonly occupied spaces of secretarial work, catering, dressmaking, and hairdressing, the girls usually decide against it.⁷⁸ Without an opportunity for change, women will remain in these realms and be consistently left out the formal sector.

Despite the encouragement that mothers have for their daughters to continue school and move into the public realm, in actuality, many young women do not receive education at a very high level. In part, it is due to the fact that the majority of Senior Secondary Schools, the level needed prior to University entrance, are available to males only. Even within the coeducational schools, only one-third of their boarding space is reserved for girls, making equal access to higher education impossible.⁷⁹ Akosua Anyidoho, a professor of linguistics at the University of Ghana-Legon, believes that Western education has complicated the status of women in society further.

"In the past, social status was not premised on education. There were other considerations whether a person would be respected and viewed as a

⁷⁵ Esther Ofei-Aboagye, 27

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Tettey, 42

⁷⁷ Claire Robertson, 48

⁷⁸ Florence Abena Dophyne, 52

⁷⁹ Florence Abena Dophyne, 51

prominent member of society, which made it possible for a woman also to gain that status. For instance, a woman who had ten children would be recognized. She had added so many people to the clan, to the family so there would be an official ceremony for this woman. Now if you have ten children they will say, are you a rat or something?’ and therefore people want two to three children.”⁸⁰

With these limitations and with the introduction of a system that was culturally inconsistent, it becomes understandable (though not acceptable) why women are forced into certain areas.

Fellipa Eyeson is one woman who has stepped outside a woman’s traditional employment spheres. She is the owner and founder of the maternity home Nyame Tse Ase in Komenda, where many women go to receive information on family planning and pre- and post-natal care. She used to work as the midwife at the sugar factory in Komenda and there was no health center for women in the greater community. When the sugar factory collapsed, Fellipa Eyeson started traveling throughout the villages treating women, and eventually she was able to open the clinic with her own money. When I asked her how men reacted to her position as a female entrepreneur, she responded to my question as if the answer were obvious. “I am a woman who is doing midwifery. They know that a woman can do such work and because of this they are supportive.”⁸¹ Her reaction to my question was surprising to me and simple to her. Her statement revealed that while “this is women’s work” and is indeed a business enterprise, primarily it is about family and women’s needs. There is no threat because it is a woman’s realm and does not impinge on the interests of men.

As stated above, there is nothing wrong with women filling certain spaces. But, when women consistently complain of their status in society and are unable to attain a level of equality due to a restricted future, the concern arises. The largest factor that holds women in certain places is their duty to the home. Earlier, Alberta commented that the environment at Wesley Girls’ School was ideal for her roles as a mother and an employed worker. While women can be bankers or have other such jobs that require working full-time away from the home, they will have to work far harder, she noted.⁸² This does not mean that women cannot partake in certain spheres, but if they are to adequately fill their socially expected roles, then their options become very limited. Therefore many women are informally dissuaded from certain professions. At the end of the interview with Gina, I asked her to tell me her thoughts on the present status of women in Ghanaian society. She commented that people talk about women, “as if we are no par with men. But we are not being treated as equals in terms of jobs, marriage... we have something in us. We

⁸⁰ Akosua Anyidoho.

⁸¹ Fellipa Eyeson, interview , 8 April 2005, Komenda, Ghana, notes in possession of author.

⁸² Alberta Croffie Quayson

can contribute. We have proven leadership in all societies. “ After this empowered statement, she finished my returning, of course, to a woman’s domestic duties. “Before a woman is employed, however, you should consult the woman, look at her family background, and if she has children that the job will take her away from for a long time, then she shouldn’t do it.”⁸³ A woman must work, but she must never do so at the expense of a child. It is acceptable for this to remain the case, but if it does, then other accommodations must be made to ensure equality and to guarantee that the lives and needs of women will not be minimized.

⁸³ Gina Segbor

4. SITUATING THE ISSUE WITHIN WESTERN FEMINIST UNDERSTANDINGS

As a foreigner examining the situation of women in Ghana, it is important to understand the areas of strength and power that women feel as women in their own cultural context. The issue of Western hegemonic feminism entering foreign places and applying imported beliefs that the irrelevant to the situation has created in antagonism against feminist discourse within an African dialogue. During the conference at the University of Ghana, one speaker presented a definition for the way in which feminism can be viewed. "Feminism," she said, "is simply a perspective, a way of viewing relations between the genders; a way of egalitarianism...a way of thinking about the critiquing male patriarchy, male privilege. It is not about criticizing but interrogating power relations."⁸⁴ Feminism does not have to include lesbianism, male-bashing, and a renouncement of the home and gender differences. But it does include prospects of a world in which men and women build equality between them, question hierarchy, and all people receive their due rights as human beings.

This paper presents a few issues which must be addressed when situation the Ghanaian woman's experience in a Western analysis. The first concerns the need to dispel the myth of a homogenous "downtrodden African woman." Not all Westerners hold this image, but I nonetheless hope that this paper can reinforce the harmfulness of classifying these women as fundamentally oppressed. While I argue that their work is systematically marginalized, attention must be paid and credit awarded to these women for their commendable strengths, community-building abilities, and the private ownership that they have claimed. Women in Ghana are production machines. As Kofi Sam remarked before, women grow the food, finish the products and sell the goods. They are the ones people see carrying the load. They raise the children. And these women are found across diverse regions, religions, and environmental settings. While I am not prepared to pronounce women "emancipated," I am equally unwilling to bemoan their plight without recognition of their sources of strength.

The second issue which merits attention is the improper categorization of an "African woman" My research pertains to a small group of predominately Christian, Akan women living in and around Cape Coast, Ghana. Furthermore, other diversities arise in these women due to variations in age, educational background, and whether they live in a village or a city. To homogenize these subjects even as "Ghanaian women" fails to understand that although in a similar culture, their experiences are subject to much variation. Women in urban and rural areas, for example, lead quite different lives. Akosua Anyidoho believes that the community provided by women in rural areas in many ways allows them a greater liberty than women in urban settings.

⁸⁴ Anne Adams, lecture, "African's Male Feminists: The Examples of Ayi Kwei Armah (Ghana), Sembene Ousmane (Senegal), and Nurddin Farah (Somalia)" in the lectures series "Gender and the Humanities," 22 April 2005, the University of Ghana-Legon: Accra, Ghana. 22 April 2005, notes in possession of author.

They may earn less, but “there is also a sense in which whatever little that she earns would be enough to take care of herself and her children. The poor woman in an urban area doesn’t have that family support,” which may make her situation more perilous at times. Even educational levels do not entirely “liberate” women, especially in terms of relationship with men. Again, Akosua Anyidoho shares that “In rural areas if there is anything happening in the family and you’re not happy with it as a woman, you have the liberty to move. Move from it, relocate, go back to your family house, and they would normally accept you. In the urban areas there’s nowhere you can go, and so you may sit there.”⁸⁵

This is not to argue that there are no similarities among the diversities. The foundations of this paper is based around the fact that while their particular situations are diverse, the lack of public acknowledgment and care paid to women’s work brings them together. Barbara Rogers argues that. “if there is one broad generalization that one can make about rural women (and urban women I believe) it is that their non-farm work is strenuous, take enormous amounts of time, and is absolutely essential to the survival of the family concerned.”⁸⁶ In the same way, the work of urban women that takes place informally is frequently expected and not awarded praise for the economic supplement that it adds to the family wage. In a society that prides itself so greatly on motherhood, women of all backgrounds and regions have a bond in their personal, domestic roles. Monica Fogah believes that women come together at the NCWD meetings in relative solidarity. She does not see the same issue of a class problem that Western feminism has suffered. Things flow easily at meetings, she says. “There is a common interest that family life needs to be improved – whether you are educated, rich or you come from a home in which a man is domineering. Women see each other as everyone is in the same situation. All need to come out of that web-family life must be improved.”⁸⁷ In the large picture, although there are diversities and attention must be paid to these diversities, women realize that the struggle is one that they must fight in unison. “They understand the policy that if you’re together you have strength.”⁸⁸

The final issue to address is the understanding of gender in general. In order to apply feminism, a cultural definition of “woman” and “man” must be made. As mentioned at the beginning, to be a successful woman in Ghana does not mean to “become a man”. Through separation of roles and certain domains for each sex in society, groups of female solidarity as demonstrated previously, have formed. Women are allowed places of ownership. As Akosua Anyidoho said.

“In Ghana I believe some people would argue that women are subordinate to men. But it is perhaps better to say that in certain spheres of life women may play a more subordinate role and in other spheres of life the men

⁸⁵ Akosua Anyidoho

⁸⁶ Barbara Rogers. 152

⁸⁷ Monica Fogah

⁸⁸ Ibid.

might also play a more subordinate role... In the normal household there are certain things the women decide on the there are others that men would decide on, and this goes on even in the more traditional communities.”⁸⁹

The binary exists in the understanding that men and women fill different roles and the society is not striving to merge these roles. Women take immense power in being women. “Our trick is in our femininity”. Alberta said. “We don’t have to be men. We don’t have to be men at all, or be masculine. Just be a woman. Use your charm. Get things done how you want them done,”⁹⁰ and power is gained from this difference. I only advise caution in the implementation of this mentality of “separate but equal” to ensure that it truly promotes equality.

Conclusions

While the issue of women’s marginalized social and economic status needs to be revealed, addressed, and understood, primary attention will most likely not be as directly related to the plight of women, but to the economic struggle of the county in general. Until the economy improves and until people are given the technology that Kofi Sam vehemently advocates, the issue of female empowerment may fall to the background. Like Theresa Kwakye’s income-generating projects, the numerous NGOs, and the majority of the people with whom I spoke, most women view economic advancement as their personal salvation. Women are often shoved to the bottom or the sides of a struggling economy for sake of the need to address the larger picture. However, because it is not uncommon for women to head single-parent homes or for the work to be essential to the family’s survival, women’s troubles become the nation’s troubles.

The power that these women hold as caretakers and mothers must be socially, politically, and economically valued and incorporated when considering the larger picture. It is these very women who are producing the goods of Ghana and raising the children who will become the figures of tomorrow. Women carry the future in their wombs. The time has come to take this private source of power and make it public. It is time to allow women to remain women but to adapt the structure to help them fill their roles. Women must demand their rights as women and citizens.

These changes are occurring, as more women move into the public realm and allow their voices to be heard. The women with whom I interacted have hopes for a brighter future for their daughters. But for now, the battle is one that they must fight. As mothers, they hold the future,

⁸⁹ Akosua Anyidoho.

⁹⁰ Alberta Croffie Quayson

and it is their responsibility to maintain their difference while ensuring an outcome of equality. In the words of Development Studies professor Agnes Apusigah:

“If we realized (that we “fail to credit their roles and exercise agency”) and became more assertive of ourselves, we would claim our rightful spaces as men have always done. Indeed, as mothers, homemakers and wives we could value these critical roles better, teach our sons, husbands and brothers to do the same and create societies where women can be women, play our traditional roles as women and still be equal. Women can be equal because of the equal valuing of our roles whether in the workplace or home/community. Women would be better appreciated and treated fairly because we would be seen as key social players and valued as such.”⁹¹

Women have proven themselves fully capable of achievement. They have facilitated economy, education, family, and community. The duty now is to bring the knowledge of their success outside the kitchen and the dressmaking-shop for the world to see.

⁹¹ Agnes Apusigah

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

Due to the nature of this project as one that was to be research and written in four weeks, there were great limitations on my ability to master a topic comprehensively. However, my preceding research provides a starting point for many issues that could and should be further investigated.

One area of interest would be to study the changing community within the local markets as the powers of corporate, world markets are increasingly gaining control. Is this causing the community to deteriorate? Or is it building cohesion? Furthermore, if someone is better equipped to challenge the language and cultural barriers than I, it would be enriching to delve deeper into rural communities from where many of these market women come and provide them with a public voice about the status of their work, their roles in the community, their position as women, and their desires for the future.

Another issue to consider would be exploration into the changing relationship between husbands and wives as more women step into sexually integrated spheres. Issues such as women's roles in the house, changing duties, familial and financial responsibilities would be an interesting window into a cultural adaptation of people as they enter "modernity".

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